

Could the COVID-19 recovery context be a good opportunity to advance just and sustainable transformations? Learnings from the transformations to sustainability and environmental justice scholarships

Interview with Dr. Iokiñe Rodríguez, University of East Anglia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak has added an extra pressure to the longstanding ecological and socio-economic crises faced by the global community, with the climate emergency being described as “the defining issue of our time” by the United Nations Secretary-General Guterres (United Nations, 2021). Despite the sudden reduction in daily global CO₂ emissions during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Forster et al., 2020), the resulting atmospheric concentrations of major greenhouse gases continued to increase in 2020 (United Nations Environment Programme, 2020) and the world is still heading to a temperature rise far beyond the Paris Agreement’s central aim of limiting global warming to well below 2°C (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015). Therefore, one of the learnings from the pandemic in regards to climate change is that global responses require deep structural changes in key economic sectors towards decarbonization (Le Quéré et al., 2020).

Crucially, the coronavirus pandemic has also shown that societies can drastically change the way they do things. To mitigate the spread of the virus, countries all over the world have implemented an array of public health measures with sharp impacts on social behaviour.

With many countries adopting strategies to recover from a post-pandemic recession, stimulus packages can be opportunities to use these investments to address key global challenges such as climate change or social inequality. In that regard, the University of East Anglia’s (UEA) transformations to sustainability and environmental justice scholarships can help to offer valuable insights to articulate aspirations for a post-pandemic response to build back more resilient, sustainable, and just societies.

In this feature piece, Dr. Iokiñe Rodríguez (Senior Lecturer in Environment and Development at UEA) discusses the different approaches to transformations to sustainability, the challenge of combining transformations with environmental justice, and how transformation can be enacted and sustained over time. The concept of transformations towards sustainability has gained central position in global sustainability research in recent years (Patterson et al., 2017).

But what is meant by ‘transformation’? Despite the common use of the term, it is less clear what is or needs to be changed, how these transformations occur, and whose visions are to be considered. This interview aims to discuss key issues on just and sustainable transformations and how they can be applied in practice in the context of COVID-19 recovery strategies.

Dr. Iokine Rodriguez is a Senior Lecturer within the UEA School of International Development. Part of the Global Environmental Justice Group, she uses local environmental knowledge and participatory action-research to help resolve environmental conflicts and promote environmental justice in Latin America.

The interview was conducted online by Alba Prados Pascual, former environmental practitioner and currently a postgraduate researcher examining climate change policies and decarbonization strategies.

Q: Research interest in transformations towards sustainability is growing across disciplines. What are the key convergences in how different disciplines conceptualise transformations?

A: In terms of similarities, the various approaches to transformations to sustainability share the recognition that we need to put in place different processes and mechanisms to get from A (the current global environmental crisis) to B (a future that is more sustainable). Different academic disciplines are coming together to do this. Originally, the focus was on transitions away from different environmental problems that we are currently facing and was linked more strongly with the search of socio-technological innovations or policy-making responses. The transitions to sustainability scholarship have placed lot of focus on understanding socio-ecological systems as dynamic ecological and social processes. Therefore, broadly speaking, transitions to sustainability scholarship have tended to look more at the necessary changes in the governance arrangements, the institutions, and the available technologies.

Q: According to Patterson et al., (2017), some of scholarly approaches to transformation include socio-technical transitions, transitions management, socio- ecological transformations, or pathways to sustainability. What are the distinct or divergent visions on transformations that different schools of thought bring to the discussion?

A: The transformations to sustainability scholarship focuses more on bottom-up transformations, the role of resistance and mobilizations, and what has been called the ‘un-ruling politics’ in pushing for that change. Transformations thinking is more radical and aims to engage with structural and systemic barriers and the required shift in the power relations. Because of that, it gives more attention to the role of civil society. However, there are certain overlaps between these bodies of literature. Some scholars from the area of transitions are also studying power relationships but often confined within the making of the socio-technological innovations or political solutions at micro-level.

Q: What is the role of justice in transformations to sustainability? Which are the different dimensions of justice that are relevant to sustainable transformations?

A: In addition to the previous debates, some scholars are also pointing to the justice dimensions when discussing transformations to sustainability. That is the case of the Global Environmental Justice Group at UEA, where we are trying to create awareness that there is no real opportunity to transform socio-ecological systems without justice being at the core of these changes. We are seeing that many alternative processes that have been developed – for example, renewable energy projects – reproduce many of the injustices that take place in more conventional development projects, such as dams, pipelines, or road constructions. They often reproduce the same unequal participation procedures, as well as unfair distribution of the impacts and benefits of the project. There are instances where communities are forced to suffer the impacts of having a windfarm in their territories, without even being given access to the electricity being generated. These projects can also displace communities from their lands and end up being as disruptive as any other development project. In environmental conflicts, the most common dimensions of injustice are a lack of participation, an unfair distribution of the benefits and harms, but also a disrespect and disregard for local cultural identity. However, there is an even bigger level of injustice underlying most environmental conflicts that is related to the reproduction of colonial views of development, of the imposition of modernity as a civilizational model and of science as the valid form of knowledge. Transformations to sustainability must be about creating opportunities for different forms of development, knowledge, and worldviews to coexist.

Q: There is strong evidence that supports the association between conflict and transformation and, how in many cases of environmental struggles, mobilization for environmental protection is initiated by local communities in different forms of resistance and conflict (e.g., Martin et al., 2020). What is the role of conflict in transformative processes to sustainability?

A: One of the distinctive features of just transformations to sustainability thinking is the approach to conflict. In this body of knowledge, we see conflict as a productive phenomenon. We don't necessarily see conflicts as inherently negative because conflicts allow injustices to flourish and asymmetries of power to become evident, forcing discussions about them. This view of conflicts was proposed some time back by particular thinkers from peace studies like John Paul Lederach and Johan Galtung. These authors have worked with environmental conflicts and rethought how to engage with these situations of dispute. Rather than seeing them as disruptive events, they consider conflict as opportunities for transformation. Conflict transformation allows us to engage with different dimensions – such as personal, relational, structural, or even cultural frameworks – that need to change to move towards situations of greater societal justice.

Q: The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and has presented an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems, and the world of work, among others. What has been the impact of the pandemic to existing environmental struggles?

A: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a very worrying impact on environmental struggles as there has been an increment of abuse and expansion of harmful projects, such as mining in indigenous territories and protected areas. The current situation of lockdown restrictions in many countries have diffculted the capacity of communities to respond and mobilise against these projects in collective ways. We have also experienced the increase of a securitisation discourse by many governments that gives the green light to a more authoritarian form of governance. The risk in situations of crisis is the advancement of policies or projects that may face less social opposition than could be expected in normal circumstances. On the other hand, this pandemic has made injustices at different scales so clear that people have been mobilizing all the same, such as the recent protests against the tax reforms in Colombia or the Black Lives Matters movement.

Q: Governments all over the world are under mounting pressure to align their COVID-19 recovery plans to build back the economy with other environmental and social objectives. What are the key learnings from the transformations to sustainability and environmental justice scholarships on how just and sustainable transformations can be enacted and sustained over time?

A: First, putting justice in the middle of the conversation to ensure fairness in the adoption and implementation of development plans. The research on environmental struggles, particularly in Latin America (where I work), shows that we need to have societal discussions at different levels about the future we all want and about what development and well-being means to different people, opening up the conversations beyond particular projects or initiatives that create resistance. These discussions tend to happen when there is already a crisis; for example, when a particular development project is already going ahead. We need to have conversations about the development model we want to adopt as societies beyond certain projects. These discussions need to take place at local or community levels, as well as regional and national levels. Indigenous peoples have been pushing a lot to have these sorts of conversations when they refer to their own cosmovision: their own life plans or visions. The second key learning is the importance of understanding the distribution of benefits and harms of specific short and long-term development plans, such as national and regional COVID-19 recovery packages. If these plural perspectives and wellbeing views are considered, a more holistic and inclusive vision of future scenarios can be achieved.

Concluding remarks

Dr. Iokiñe Rodríguez sustains that transformations towards sustainability cannot be considered a success without social justice. The road to environmental sustainability can be pursued in an inclusive or exclusionary manner and often environmental conflicts act as opportunities for power imbalances to become evident and, potentially, be addressed. Just transformation requires forms of action that remove asymmetric distribution of transformational risks (Martin et al., 2020), but also the uneven capacity of marginalized groups to change or transform entrenched injustices (Patterson et al., 2017).

The framing of just transformations to sustainability discussed during the interview is

highly relevant in the context of COVID-19 recovery plans and their potential to deliver on the promise to build back better societies after the crisis. As 2021 advances, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to create disruption around the world. Nevertheless, political attention is increasingly turning to shaping the social and economic recovery from the crisis and many countries have adopted a variety of stimulus packages. Spending commitments have consisted mostly of emergency rescue funding thus far (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021), but they are increasingly evolving into longer-term recovery measures. Embedding justice and sustainability considerations at the heart of these strategies is crucial to ensure just pathways towards a sustainable future.

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